MUSIC EDUCATORS JOURNAL

Volume 49, Number 5 • April-May 1963

IDEALS IN COLLEGE MUSIC CRITICISM / Joel E. Cohen

PEOPLE who read music reviews, like most people who read anything, like to feel good when they're through reading. In the undergraduate community, there are at least four different ways to make people feel good in a music review—and they all displease somebody.

To satisfy the musician as a student, the review should be a kind of private lesson. The critic ideally acts as a teacher, as a musician of knowledge and taste, examining the concert and suggesting improvements. The published criticism carefully dissects the performance and illumines the musician's path to greater artistry.

Such a dissection could well be painful, however, and the musician can hope for a review that will help him in his other world, that of the career artist: the ideal review should be a free advertisement. It will be full of quotable phrases which look appropriate when printed in the paid advertisements for the next concert. With the musical sensitivity of a pneumatic drill, the reviewer ideally criticizes nothing and praises everything. He lets the reader know just enough to make him look forward to sharing the ecstasy of the performer's next concert.

The member of the audience sophisticated enough to form an opinion of his own wants a review that will confirm it. He wants to know that he was right. The review may supply more facts or jargon to support him, but its essential function is to mirror his feelings. Other, less sophisticated members of the audience may look to the review to find out what they heard and what they ought to think about it.

Finally, most people, who didn't go to the concert, look to a review for entertainment. The clever slash, the happy turn of phrase, and slick writing, regardless of how true or appropriate, make a review their ideal.

The critic faced with writing a review to match all four ideals will obviously fail. So the critic must choose. Whichever he chooses, he loses.

Student musicians don't want a critic who pretends to teach them something in public print, without his saying how good they were in the first place. But uncritical praise is so close to uncritical panning that the musician, just for his protection, wants the critic to be at least minimally perceptive. The critic who adheres to the ideal either of education or of advertisement gets musician's anathema.

Nonmusicians are just as easy to please. Many people who go to a concert want a critical analysis in the review; other readers couldn't care less. Both musicians and members of the audience usually forget that the critic works on a newspaper, and most of the rest of the newspaper's staff is neither musically trained nor interested in musical analysis; his co-writers are interested in his writing. Thus the critic himself is subject to a peculiar kind of intramural criticism which finds the ideals of the student musician and the critical audience simply dull.

If the critic's only problem were to effect a compromise among these four ideals, his life would be much simpler than it actually is. But the undergraduate music critic is always conscious that he is part of the college community. That status adds difficulties.

If the college music critic constantly pans a student musical organization, which even by some mythical student standards deserves to be panned, he runs the risk of driving away all the audience but the music faculty, and doing the organization in. That's carrying criticism too far. On the other hand, the critic has a certain responsibility to his audience; put in the crudest terms, he ought not to recommend a concert likely to be less enjoyable than, say, three hours in a drunken stupor. His only hope of getting out of this dilemma rests in seeing the musical organizations improve—especially if, like this college music critic, he actually likes music and is happy, is grateful, is well nigh deliriously joyous, at the sound of a good concert.

A second additional problem of the undergraduate music critic is that some of his best friends may be musicians, and after a few reviews, that some of his best enemies are musicians. He cannot criticize musicians in the abstract the night after the concert, when he will see them in the dining hall the next morning.

There are two easy ways out of this passel of dilemmas.

The first is impregnable egotism. When rats are faced with a choice, and get punished for selecting either alternative, they refuse to leave the starting box. Similarly, critics aban-

don all four ideals and all responsibilities. They use reviews to slay enemies, reward friends, and display their towering genius with the written word.

The other way out—and a very attractive one—is not to write music reviews at all. Let word of mouth help or hurt undergraduate musical organizations and musicians. Abdicate.

But both egotism and abdication are solutions that work only for the individual critic. As public policies they are not viable. For newspapers always can, and will, find mediocre hacks to write on music, when no one better is available; and in a college, as anywhere else, overly bumptious hacks are intolerable. The best the responsible critic can hope for is a successful compromise that leaves everybody grumbling, but quietly.

Joel E. Cohen '64 reviews student musical performances for the Crimson.

He recently was named Editorial Chairman of the Crimson *as well. Mr. Cohen was the author of "Some Relationships Between Music and Mathematics," which appeared in the September-October 1961 issue of the Music Educators Journal.*

These three short articles are reprinted with special permission from the December 7 issue of *The Harvard Crimson*. Originally they were part of a symposium including undergraduate theatre, music, and writing.